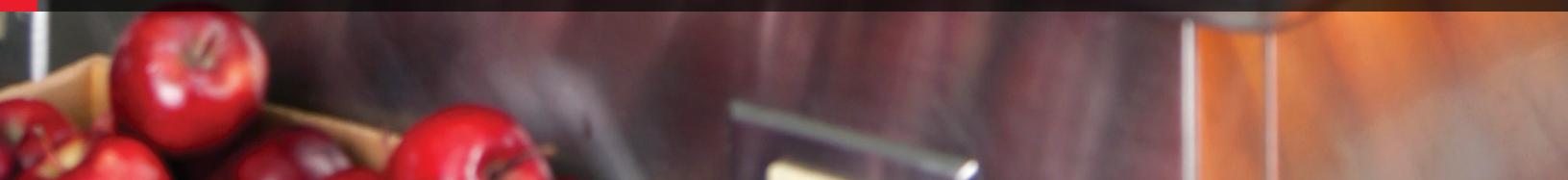




BEST PRACTICES IN K-12 DINING EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT & RETENTION

How three school districts created environments employees want to return to year after year





Dining service employee retention and development are vital for school districts to be able to provide exceptional dining services to students every day. Without fully staffed and fully engaged teams, dining services can be forced to shut down lines of service and dining stations. This results in dissatisfied students and parents and lower dining revenue for districts.

The reality in today's marketplace is school districts often struggle to keep dining staff employed for a variety of reasons, including:

- Competition with the broader service job marketplace
- Employees not being engaged in their roles
- Absence of a supportive employee culture
- Lack of employee training, development, recognition and career advancement opportunities

To overcome the challenges of maintaining high-quality, fully engaged dining staff, three districts — Crowley Independent School District, Oswego Community Unit School District and Northwest Independent School District — have adopted high-impact employee development and retention strategies, including partnering with an experienced foodservice provider versus remaining self-operating. As a result, their schools enjoy successful dining programs and the freedom to focus on their core business of educating students.



“It’s important our employees come to work and are engaged in their jobs every day, so our kids are taken care of and fed. To keep our dining staff engaged and happy on the job, they are given the best training and ongoing support. As a result, they show up, are productive and retain high morale.”

— Jay Warren, Human Resource Manager, Crowley Independent School District

“Ultimately, if we don’t adequately develop and support our dining staff members, our retention numbers go down. To retain people, we have to invest in them. We have to show interest in their development and job satisfaction.”

— Destini Nowlin, Human Resources,
Northwest Independent School District

“We really put ourselves out there as a management team to create an inclusive environment where our employees are happy to show up to work, they’re comfortable on the job, and they know they’re supported and valued.”

— Mark Jelencic, General Manager,
Oswego Community Unit School District

HERE ARE THEIR BEST PRACTICES FOR EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION

CROWLEY INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

“At Crowley, we’re in a very competitive market,” said HR Manager Jay Warren. “It’s an employee’s market. To attract and retain talent means we need to have a strong pay system, programs in place that speak to engagement, and the right culture to keep the employees engaged. If we don’t focus on maintaining the workplace and on engagement and retention, we lose folks and experience high turnover.”

To counter employee retention challenges, Crowley has created a comprehensive slate of best practices in employee development and retention.

- Aramark Partner Since 2010
- 15,972 K-12 Students
- 24 Locations
 - 4 High Schools
 - 3 Middle Schools
 - 15 Elementary Schools
 - 2 Satellite Programs
- 168 Team Members
 - 160 Employees
 - 3 Hourly Supervisors
 - 5 Salaried Management Team Members

Crowley’s Employee Development Best Practices

▶ Onboarding and Orientation

Each new employee engages in the district’s onboarding program, which includes spending one-on-one time with managers, as well as having introductions to every department related to their job. The program focuses on engagement and skills required to be more successful on the job. In addition, new recruits receive daily feedback, while all employees participate in monthly huddles about any current issues.

▶ Peer Mentorship Program

Along with manager onboarding and orientation, the managers also pair new employees with top-performing team members to provide peer mentorship.

▶ Manager-in-Training (MIT) Program

Strong team members who want to advance in the organization can participate in a six-week, classroom-based kitchen management training program. Employees with the right skills, characteristics and behaviors, such as those who consistently go above and beyond or serve as the chef’s “right hand” in the kitchen, are recruited into the program, which covers everything from food production to human relations. Over the last three years, almost 15 employees have taken the manager training. Four have advanced to kitchen manager positions, and two have become assistant managers.

▶ Safety Training Program

Employees are given new occupational safety lessons every week.

Crowley's Employee Retention Best Practices

► Recognition and Rewards

The district uses Aramark's points and social reward system called Encore! Encore! Team members earn points in the system that they can redeem for items through a catalog. The district also holds "Spot the Hazard" days, awarding points to employees who call out workplace hazards they spot throughout the workday, such as a knife left in the sink. Additionally, teams that go an entire semester without incidents get to wear jeans on Fridays as long as they remain incident-free.

► Employee Socials

The school district holds annual socials to give new employees the opportunity to meet their peers in a relaxed and fun environment, and to promote collaboration and teamwork. The socials also provide a relaxed environment for dining managers to get direct employee feedback.

The team also organizes other spirit days, such as Superheroes Day, where everyone dresses up as their favorite superhero and takes photos.

► Annual Employee Engagement Survey

This survey gives employees the opportunity to answer specific questions about their workplace onboarding, training and leadership. The feedback helps the school district find its strengths and opportunities for improvement.



Crowley Employee Success Story

Starting as a part-time foodservice worker, **Lawanda Gates** has been an employee with Aramark for five years. Her work ethic stood out as she became a high-potential employee, assisting in every capacity needed in the kitchen and becoming a strong partner to her manager. Her attendance, performance and customer engagement also stood out.



In 2017, Lawanda enrolled in our MIT foodservice leadership program to broaden her leadership skills. After completing the program, she was offered a kitchen manager position. She has high expectations for her team and models the behavior she expects.

Today, her priorities are producing quality nutritious meals and getting the kids fed in a timely fashion so they can get back to class ready to learn. Through her leadership, school meal participation and customer satisfaction continue to climb.



OSWEGO COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT, ILLINOIS

“At Oswego, employee retention is an ongoing focus, especially considering that we employ team members for just 10 months with two months off every year,” said Mark Jelencic. “Yet, over the course of five school years, we have managed to keep employee turnover to just 11 percent, including all cooks, prep servers and custodians. In the same time period, our voluntary manager turnover has been just 2 percent. The key to our success for both retention and development is engagement. Our strategy comes in many forms, including constant, open communication. But our two main focuses are site visits and the Encore! Encore! system.”

Oswego has created a comprehensive plan to proactively address employee retention challenges.

- Aramark partner since 1990
- 17,436 K-12 students
- 20 locations
 - 2 High Schools
 - 5 Middle Schools
 - 13 Elementary Schools
 - 2 Satellite Programs
- 153 Team Members
 - 150 Employees
 - 3 Salaried Management Team Members

Oswego Employee Development Best Practices

▶ **Monthly Manager Meetings**

Supervisors regularly visit every site to address issues and introduce updates, such as new recipe and menu rollouts and other new program implementation.

▶ **Registered Dietitian Monthly Trainings**

The registered dietitian provides monthly trainings on upcoming menus, including all additions or changes, as well as any promotions.

▶ **One-on-One Teamwork**

Oswego is constantly working with its dining teams, including site managers, cooks, servers and custodians in one-on-one interactions. This helps ensure everybody knows what is expected at all times and has the right skills. The district has found that this builds stronger employee-manager relationships and, therefore, stronger employees.

Oswego Employee Retention Best Practices

▶ Return Intention Letters

Each year the dining leadership team makes site visits to each location in May, asking associates in person to return the following year and providing return intention letters that reinforce their appreciation for the employees.

“We deliver ‘return intention’ letters, where we share our appreciation for their hard work and contribution to our success. We let them know how much we value them as employees,” Jelencic said. “Our return intention letters have made a big difference. Going to them in person and showing them they mean a lot to us and that we’d love to have them back the next year makes a big difference in retention.”

▶ Recognition and Rewards

Like Crowley, the district uses Aramark’s points and social reward system, Encore! Encore!

“The Encore! Encore! system has been a phenomenal vehicle to help us show our appreciation to our staff members,” Jelencic explained. “We’re not always able to visit every location and wish our staff members a happy birthday or congratulate them on a work anniversary. But we are able to send a card and a note. Plus, employees also receive team support because people can log into the application and congratulate them and give them a thumbs up. This definitely helps with employee morale.”

▶ Employee Appreciation Day

The district sponsors a huge cookout for all employees where they can relax, have fun and bond with their coworkers and the management team.

“It’s the little things that add up. They show our employees we truly care about them and value them, and appreciate all the good work that they’re doing for the district,” Jelencic said.



Oswego Employee Success Story

Oswego strives to hire from within for managerial positions. As a result, every site manager position filled in the past four years has been a promotion for current employees. “Our employees appreciate the career advancement. Also, it’s easier to train a current employee rather than bring in somebody from the outside,” Jelencic said. “So we focus our time on identifying future candidates for positions down the line, so that we’re prepared if anything opens up.”

Role advancements at Oswego included:

Marc Arakelian

General manager promoted to district manager

Kelly Williamson

Oswego AFSD promoted to West Chicago Food Service Director

Wendy Hron Castillo

Oswego AFSD promoted to Chicago International Charter Schools Food Service Director

Mark Jelencic

13-year Aramark employee who started as a college intern in a business dining location as a Salad Prep Cook promoted up through multiple roles to ultimately become General Manager of Oswego

Patricia Alexakos

Oswego hourly cashier in an elementary school advanced to cook then took a management position. Today she is a foodservice manager for the program, leveraging her experience in the district and her background in banking prior to joining the team to excel in her latest role.



NORTHWEST INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

“We’re facing competition from multiple directions. We definitely need to stay on our toes to keep our team members engaged in their jobs here. We continue to encourage them to grow and keep them motivated because we definitely want them around. Luckily, we have people who’ve been with Northwest for 25 years, so that says a lot.”

– **Destini Nowlin, Northwest Independent School District**

To meet employee retention challenges head-on, Northwest implemented a new strategic plan.

- **Aramark Partner Since 1986**
- **24,934 K-12 Students**
- **29 Locations**
 - 4 High Schools
 - 6 Middle Schools
 - 19 Elementary Schools
 - 3 Satellite Programs
- **233 Team Members**
 - 225 Employees
 - 8 Salaried Management Team Members

Northwest Employee Development Best Practices

▶ **Onboarding and Training**

The district’s goal is to give employees the right information for their specific roles, so they can apply it and understand how they contribute to a better dining experience for the students.

▶ **Identifying Skill Gaps**

Northwest continually reassesses its training programs, identifying any gaps and curating the most relevant and current training materials to address those needs. For example, the district’s registered dietitians not only leveraged trainings available through our Learning Management System, but also created multiple new webinars on nutrition, meal planning and food safety.

“From our experience, people don’t feel valued when they are not being appropriately trained for their jobs,” Nowlin said. “When we give them the right training materials, they feel more valued and are happier on the job. To achieve this goal, we have to identify the skill gaps preventing them from performing at a high level, and fill those gaps.”

Northwest Employee Retention Best Practices

► Staff Conversations

This involves engaging with staff members individually to find out what their specific needs are to perform their jobs at higher levels.

During onboarding, employees have several opportunities to train and have conversations with HR management, including:

- New employee initial skills training, completed throughout the first 1-2 weeks
- Facilitated testing environment for certifications, such as Food Handler and ServSafe
- Continuous Improvement Training for any identified skill gaps as needed

Our chefs also engage with staff monthly to freshen up skills or develop new skills, such as knife skills, time saving practices, specific dish training and equipment training.

Finally, Branded Franchisors that partner with Aramark, such as Papa John's, offer specific brand training, either on-site or off-site, and are always available for employees who regularly and consistently work with those brands.

"If we're not engaging with our staff and finding out what their needs are, we're not able to function optimally," Nowlin said. "It's important to understand another person's perspective and point of view. We have regular conversations with our team members that are feedback-focused, so we can really understand their point of view."

► Creating SAFE Environments

The district created the acronym SAFE for its style of manager-to-employee communication. It stands for Secure, Appropriate, Feedback-focused and Engaged. The idea is to create an environment where employees feel "safe" enough to communicate their feelings, concerns and needs.

"With safe spaces and safe environments, we can help each person understand it's OK to approach their managers about anything," Nowlin explained. "They can have conversations knowing that it will be kept private. This approach also shows employees their manager is present and demonstrating a willingness to hear what the other person is sharing."



Northwest Employee Success Story

One foodservice worker, **Vantrese Gaddis**, had already advanced to lead cook but was hungry for more responsibility. In her lead cook role, she had taken it upon herself to train three other workers to become lead cooks. During the summer months, she reached out to her manager seeking her next challenge. The leadership team gave her the opportunity to share what she thought would be a challenge for her — something that didn't limit her ambition or push her too far. She offered great ways she felt she could contribute and add real value.

The result was giving her two new kitchen management projects, along with a pay increase, with the long-term goal of preparing her for a permanent management position when one becomes available.

If your school district is struggling to keep dining staff engaged, let's discuss how Aramark can help.



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